

Tatmadaw's Crackdown on The Rohingyas: A SWOT Analysis

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Abstract: The recent Rohingya crisis has drawn intense research attention worldwide lately, but the Tatmadaw's perspective in the crackdown has not received much attention. Thus, this article analyses Tatmadaw's perspective on its crackdown decision on the Rohingyas. The article avails SWOT framework (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) for the analysis. The article argues that the Tatmadaw is militarily successful in achieving its goal. However, even though Tatmadaw is successful in the short-term, sustaining it in the long-term or converting military success into political success will be challenging, especially if international community comes into the stage with robust action.

Keywords: Tatmadaw, Crackdown, Rohingyas, SWOT Analysis, Rohingya Crisis Solution.

Introduction

The Tatmadaw, the official name of the armed forces of Myanmar, militarily attacked the Rohingyas, one of the ethnic communities (not recognized by the Myanmar government) in August 2017. The Tatmadaw brutally cracked down on the Rohingyas - indiscriminately killed, raped and forced out 7 million Rohingya population out of their living place in Rakhine State, Myanmar.

The heavily-armed military with extensive rough-terrain-combat experience annihilated the Rohingyas through a large-scale and massive military attack. The army killed, raped, set the villages on fire in the Rakhine State. In short, the Rohingya people could not even stand in front of the brutal military assault. The military did all that was necessary to drive the Rohingyas out of its territory without any regard of the civilians (They Gave Them Long Swords, 2018). It was a well-planned and coordinated attack (Kurlantzick, 2018). Though there have been insurgency activities in Rakhine State, like other administrative areas of Myanmar, since independence in 1948, this military attack on the Rohingyas became a necessary action at this time as the insurgents recently attacked 30 government targets in August 2017 (e.g., Tatmadaw army bases, police outposts etc.) using small weapons and explosives and the attackers (i.e., ARSA insurgents) were believed to be trained as well (Markusen, 2018). Therefore, the army decided to root out the insurgents from Rakhine State once and for all.

The article analyses Tatmadaw's perspective of its decision to attack on the Rohingyas. The article proffers a SWOT framework (Strength, Weakness, Opportunity, and Threat) based analysis. The article argues that Tatmadaw is militarily successful in achieving its goal. However, the article further argues that upholding this short-term success in the long-term will be challenging. In other word, converting this military success into long-term political success will be challenging for the Tatmadaw vis a vis the Myanmar government and the future largely depends on the policies adopted by the government in the coming months.

The article is organized into six main parts. Following introduction, second part explains the methodology of this article. Third part briefly introduces SWOT framework and the fourth part applies the framework and explains the Tatmadaw's rationale /decision to undertake massive military attack on the Rohingyas with four sub-points: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats for Tatmadaw. Fifth part presents a brief appraisal and lastly, the sixth part draws conclusion.

Methodology

The article uses a qualitative research method. Internet-transmitted electronic documents, found in keyword-based search on google, are used. Analyzing the secondary e-literatures using document analysis method (Bowen, 2009), the article is written from an interpretative approach.

SWOT Analytical Framework

SWOT Framework is a popular analytical tool in management studies (Humphrey, 2005). SWOT analysis is a strategic method for companies/businesses to determine its strengths - weaknesses in comparison to its competitors as well as the opportunities - threats emanating from environment. The essence of the SWOT framework is to analyze situation, evaluate future prospects, and make sound decision using four variables: two internal and two external. The internal variables are 'strengths' & 'weaknesses' in relations to the competing/target entity and the two external variables are 'opportunities' and 'threats' emanating from the external environment. This article uses this SWOT framework because it seems promising to provide some insights to understand Tatmadaw's crackdown on the Rohingya and the future implications of solution to the crisis.

Understanding Tatmadaw's Crackdown Decision over the Rohingyas: A SWOT Analytical Framework

A SWOT framework based analysis regarding the Tatmadaw's attack on the Rohingyas. This framework analyses one by one Tatmadaw's realized strengths - estimated weaknesses and perceived opportunities and threats from the environment for it. Each of the points is described below:

Realized Strengths of the Tatmadaw

The realized strength refers to the Tatmadaw's superior capabilities and advantages over the insurgents (i.e., ARSA) in particular and the Rohingyas in general to achieve its goal. The Tatmadaw has clear and bold comparative strength in achieving its success.

Tatmadaw has strong administrative and political backup. Tatmadaw is administered by the ministry of defense. According to the Constitution of Myanmar, the Tatmadaw directly reports to the National Defense and Security Council (NDSC) which is an eleven-member National Security Council responsible for security and defense affairs in Myanmar. The NDSC has the highest authority in the Government of Myanmar (The Constitution of the Republic of Myanmar, 2018). Moreover, the Tatmadaw has the legitimacy of using force.

The Myanmar Army is considered as the second largest active force in Southeast Asia after the People's Army of Vietnam. The Global Fire Power ranks Myanmar 35th out of 135 countries around the world. The total military personnel of Myanmar is 516,000 (active 406,000 and reserve 110,000). Myanmar has a defense budget of 2400,000,000 USD (Myanmar Military Strength, 2018).

Tatmadaw has highly professional and dedicated army with distinctive competence. Myanmar has superior military force backed by relatively modern military technology, defense equipments which is highly advantageous over estimated capability of the insurgents in Rakhine State. Also, the military demonstrated capacity of fighting conventional military battles in difficult terrains with insurgents in different administrative districts of Myanmar since its independence in 1948.

The Tatmadaw also has some strategic advantage emanating from various projects undertaken in Rakhine State related to investment, development, humanitarian assistance, social service programs which were carried out by various international investors, government and non-government actors etc. in the past in Rakhine State (Gyo, 2018). The Myanmar government systematically expanded its influence in the Rakhine State while dwindled the influence of the locals while various international actors worked in the Rakhine State (Gyo, 2018).

Tatmadaw has a superior collective moral backed by state legitimacy to protect its territory from any attack on its territorial integrity or attempt of dismembering it in the name of regional autonomy/independence (e.g., ARSA's declared goal). Moreover, with the assurance of 'no responsibility' or 'no accountability' for its operation and actions from the higher authority of the Myanmar government gave the military a formidable strength.

Estimated Weaknesses of the Tatmadaw

The estimated weaknesses measures the factors could actually prevent the military from achieving its goal. Virtually there were not any concrete weaknesses of Tatmadaw in achieving its goal.

The insurgents or the Rohingyas were virtually disadvantageous and very less powerful or competitive force. Since the capability of the allegedly claim ARSA was proven not to possess credible resistance power.

Tatmadaw had disadvantages regarding the knowledge of the terrain comprise of hills, forests etc., in the Rakhine State. However, they had minimal and necessary knowledge since their police force has been working there. Also, the Tatmadaw did not have any support from the Rohingyas. However, Tatmadaw could supplant that with its superior military capacity.

Perceived Opportunities for the Tatmadaw

Perceived opportunities measure the opportunities that Tatmadaw could exploit from the outside environment. The Tatmadaw has several opportunities to cash out while carrying out its attack on the Rohingyas.

Since the Rohingyas are insulated from international community, they were assumed to be unable to attract international attention. Moreover, as Myanmar is neither a UNO member nor a signatory of the International Human Rights and Refugee Law, the Tatmadaw thought that they could easily avoid any allegation or action from the UNO.

Regional giants, China and India, were expected to play a positive role to achieve its success. At least, Tatmadaw was confident that they won't play any negative role since both have hefty investments (Jaishankar, 2015) and deep interest in Myanmar (Cook, 2010). Both China and India are competing to gain comparative 'balance of influence' in Myanmar for their vital economic and crucial strategic interests which has significant implications on broad 'balance of influence game' in Asia, in general, and in South Asia, in particular. Though geographically, Myanmar is situated in South East Asia, due to the strategic geographical position and historical deep exchange & mutual influence with South Asia (i.e., Chittagong - Arakan/Rakhine State connections) (Phayre, 1884; Cooks, 1910; Harvey, 1925; Roberts, 2018) it means pushing Myanmar too far. So, some might consider Myanmar to belong to 'Extended South Asia'. China proved its support/assistance for Myanmar on multiple occasions in international forum with the use of veto power which lagged the UNO to take any action against Myanmar in the past (Minar, 2018).

Bangladesh has been a proven peaceful neighbor. During the past Rohingya influxes resulted from various campaigns undertaken by the government of Myanmar in 1978, 1991-92, 2012 Bangladesh has always been a meek responder; it accommodated and absorbed the Rohingyas instead of taking any concrete military action. It was clear to Tatmadaw that Bangladesh, at best, could approach Myanmar with collaboration of the UNO for any kind of solution. Myanmar has been successfully denying and delaying UNO's urges in the past. For Tatmadaw UNO's coming forward for any solution seemed more likely an opportunity that Myanmar could exploit.

The Rohingyas have been weakened and delegitimized through continuous and consistent policies and actions undertaken by successive regimes in power. After about five to six decades since independence in 1948, the Rohingyas did not really have any economic power to survive military's action (Chaudet, 2018). The weakness of the Rohingyas vis a vis the weakness of the ARSA, gave the Tatmadaw further opportunity to undertake an attack that was sure to result in complete victory.

Possible Threats for the Tatmadaw

The SWOT threat measures the possible threats emanating from the environment that might hinder achieving the goal. There was no virtual existential threat that could actually stop Tatmadaw from achieving its goal.

It was well known to the Tatmadaw that ARSA lacks funds, weapons to pose any serious threat to the military (Chaudet, 2018). So, the ARSA did not pose any serious threat to the Tatmadaw in achieving its victory of the ARSA vis a vis the Rohingyas.

With regard to human rights concern, there was concern of possible negative impact on Myanmar's international economic relations. The most feared threats include possible economic blockade from the Western countries, for instance, economic sanctions, embargo etc. However, this fear was nullified by two things: first, it was already credible to the western countries that economic sanctions hurt the poor people in the target countries which the western countries don't want and second, the support of China and India was significant source of assurance to avoid or tackle any negative economic pressure that might emerge.

The response of the neighboring country, Bangladesh, which remains the only other source of threat to achieve the goal since they were likely to be affected due to this operation. Bangladesh has been affected from such government's operation on the Rohingyas since 1978. However, as previously mentioned, Bangladesh has repeatedly been proved to be a weak, non-reactive and silent neighbor. Bangladesh has been absorbing the

Rohingyas who have been pushed out from Myanmar in multiple occasions in the past in 1978, 1991-92, 2012 etc.

An Appraisal of the Tatmadaw's Military Operation

The military undertook a disproportionate response of perceived threat from the insurgents and/or Rohingyas, whose goal is assumed either to create an autonomous region in Rakhine State or independent area of their own, because the military was totally confident about its comparative advantage over all the variables discussed above and victory was more likely. Tatmadaw had obvious relative strengths, no relative weaknesses, myriad of opportunities to avail and only meagre perceived threats. Tatmadaw decisively and precisely won the battle, it took total control of Rakhine State and forced out all the Rohingyas from the territory of Myanmar (as it claims). So did happen, the Tatmadaw is successful in achieving its goal.

However, Tatmadaw' operation has only been based on tactics, not guided by strategy. Tactics is the application of military force which is warfare in other word. Strategy is about the use made of force for political purposes (What is Strategy?, 2013). Tatmadaw's operation has only been focused on the application of the military means. Tatmadaw has had a poor strategy, if it had at all. The force, military means, is supposed to meet the political ends. The underlying central political goal of Myanmar government has been to establish absolute political control over its territory (Rakhine State) vis a vis ensure its territorial integrity, especially from assumed threat of dismemberment of Myanmar by the insurgents (i.e., ARSA). The Tatmadaw disregarded strategic ways of the use of its force for achieving the political object. Instead of considering other means or targeting the insurgents, the military targeted the entire Rohingyas' civilian base. The military brutally killed, raped innumerable Rohingyas (Burma, 2018) and compelled all 7 million Rohingyas to flee from Myanmar who took shelter in the neighboring Bangladesh.

The government of Myanmar underestimated the possibility of the international community's involvement in the aftermath of its military action. The Tatmadaw did not think it through or did not care about the future consequences of the brutal use of military force over Rohingyas. As world is gradually being aware about the Rohingyas mass-killing, the more and more the international community is coming forward to take necessary action. The Myanmar government failed to presage the consequences of its military behavior and especially the possibility of robust reaction from international community.

So, the challenge ahead for the Myanmar government is to convert its apparent short-term success into long-term success. The sustenance of the short-term military success in the long term political success is the key challenge for Myanmar government and the future prospect largely depends on the ability of Myanmar government to face or convince the international community and shape possible retaliatory action of the latter in the coming days. The Tatmadaw is successful in its conduct of military force but ultimate result of the success depends on what the government does next or policy it adopts.

If the government modifies its prior position of not accepting the Rohingyas as citizens and keeps denying Rohingyas' place in Rakhine State and at the same time fails to convince international community that might result in UNO's intervention under the responsibility to protect principle. In such case, if UNO intervenes in Rakhine to establish a 'safe zone' for the Rohingyas, it would mean strategic failure of Tatmadaw. The Tatmadaw would lose the peace even if it won the battle.

Discussion and Conclusion

In sum, the article has provided a SWOT analysis on Tatmadaw's military operation over insurgents/Rohingyas in Rakhine State. It has presented an analysis on the Tatmadaw's position vis a vis insurgents'/Rohingyas' position in terms of 'Strengths', 'Weaknesses', 'Opportunities', and 'Threats'.

Tatmadaw achieved a decisive success in achieving its goal and remains successful till date. However, after victory, Tatmadaw and the government of Myanmar is facing a different situation than it envisioned? The international community is gradually increasing pressure to take back the Rohingyas into their homeland, Rakhine State. There has been a robust claim for trial of the targeted military personnel who mainly carried out the campaign on the Rohingyas and seem to be responsible for mass atrocity.

The Myanmar government has positively responded to some of the bilateral initiatives with Bangladesh. But as the military is confused there has been no concrete progress so far. The military vis a vis the government is confused how much of its success to compromise to assuage international community which is causing delay of the process because the government wants the Rakhine State devoid of the Rohingyas.

The international community has also lack of consensus exactly what action to take against Myanmar. Though they have more or less consensus that Myanmar has to take the Rohingya back, they are divided in term of imposing sanctions and economic embargo as these have implications on the people (e.g., worse for the poor) besides or much less than the government.

To reiterate, if UNO undertakes action under 'responsibility to protect' principle to ensure safety and security for the Rohingyas in Rakhine State, the Tatmadaw and the government of Myanmar will have to relinquish its military success and/or its tactical success. The massive military attack on the Rohingyas does not seem to be a rational use of force in the eyes of the international community vis a vis to the UNO. So, the government of Myanmar now has to decide what future they want for themselves and for the Rohingyas.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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